



A joint project of:
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Briefing Note: Creating a Special Envoy for Palestinian Children

Background

Twenty members of the United States Congress signed a letter to President Barack Obama on June 20, urging the appointment of a Special Envoy for Palestinian Children to ensure the U.S. government prioritizes Palestinian children's rights.

Special envoys are senior officials at the U.S. Department of State responsible for collecting and analyzing information and monitoring developments on specific foreign policy issues. It is a practical mechanism typically used to ensure that significant focus and attention will be placed on a given regional or thematic issue.

A Special Envoy for Palestinian Children would examine and monitor the situation of Palestinian children living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and work to hold Israeli and Palestinian governments accountable to their obligations under international human rights instruments, promote greater respect for human rights, and increase protections for Palestinian children.

Members of Congress send a letter to Obama

The recent [letter](#), initiated by Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minnesota, expresses concern for Palestinian children under 18 years old living “under the constant fear of arrest, detention, and violence at the hands of the Israeli military,” and declares “[t]he situation on the ground is rapidly deteriorating and we must act now.”

The lawmakers specifically raised “profound concern” regarding the Israeli government’s longstanding policy of arresting and prosecuting Palestinian children in the Israeli military detention system, and generally declared that “ignoring the trauma being inflicted on millions of Palestinian children undermines our American values and will ensure the perpetuation of a conflict and occupation we all want to see end peacefully.”

» [Read the full letter: http://bit.ly/2b57ECE](http://bit.ly/2b57ECE)

State Department Response

In July, the State Department responded to Rep. McCollum on the President’s behalf. The response letter expresses shared “concern over the conditions under which some of these [Palestinian] children are living,” as well as a shared “commitment to protect their right to grow up with dignity and opportunity.” It also generally acknowledges “ongoing violence” as deeply troubling.

The State Department then dismisses the need for a Special Envoy for Palestinian Children stating, “[b]ecause our Embassy in Tel Aviv, our Consulate General in Jerusalem, and our Special Envoy for Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations have been deeply involved in all of these issues that so significantly affect the lives of Palestinian children, we believe that they are best placed at this time to carry out the important work that you suggest.”

In short, we are deeply troubled by the Administration's response because it is devoid of any rights-based reply to the lawmakers' core concerns regarding grave and systematic human rights violations against Palestinian children.

Responding to the lawmakers' concern regarding the systematic denial of due process rights, including the renewed use of administrative detention against children, and widespread ill-treatment and torture of Palestinian children in the Israeli military detention system, the State Department simply declared "[w]e will continue to engage with the Government of Israel on the implementation of policies to make the military detention system more humane, especially as it relates to minors."

In a military detention system where three out of four Palestinian children experience some form of physical violence after arrest, and 97 percent are denied access to lawyers prior to or during interrogation; failing to demand that Israeli authorities comply with international law simply works to enable abuse and perpetuate injustice against Palestinian children.

The State Department, by declaring they will continue to work with Israeli authorities to make the military detention system "more humane," mistakenly presumes that the Israeli military detention and court system can be improved and is interested in administering justice.

When it comes to children, international law demands that detention must be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time and the best interests of the child must be a primary concern.

In no circumstance should children be detained and prosecuted under the jurisdiction of military courts. As a minimum safeguard, while Palestinian children living under Israeli military occupation continue to be arrested and prosecuted within the Israeli military court system, the United States should demand that Israeli authorities respect and ensure basic due process rights and the absolute prohibition against torture and ill-treatment.

» [Read the full State Department response: http://bit.ly/2bn1Z0k](http://bit.ly/2bn1Z0k)

Next steps

While the Obama Administration is aware of the issues, it is clear they are not yet willing to take any concrete action to address the lawmakers' concerns. The 20 members of Congress that signed the letter to President Obama recognize systemic impunity and persistent grave human rights violations combined with limited prospects for Palestinian youth are, at least in part, the triggers for recent violence.

They also understand that failing to demand human rights, justice and equality for Palestinian children perpetuates injustice and a nearly 50-year occupation that must end. We will keep working with these members of Congress to challenge Israel's prolonged military occupation of Palestinians and will continue organizing and supporting an extensive network of people demanding immediate protections for Palestinian children held in Israeli military detention.
